

Diane Abbott, misogynoir and the politics of Black British feminism's anticolonial imperatives

'In Britain too, it's as if we don't exist'

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Abstract

This article argues that it is remiss to understand the acute intensification of white supremacist politics in contemporary Britain without paying close attention to how this racism is inherently gendered and sexualised. This will be discussed in relation to the gendered racism of 'misogynoir' as experienced by the British Member of Parliament, Diane Abbott. The article uses Shirley Anne Tate's (2015) powerful analysis of the Sable-Saffron Venus in the English imaginary to argue that forms of British, and more explicitly English, national identity have been worked out on the back of systemic efforts to erase the material and epistemic presence of Black women in Britain from the British body politic. It further argues that the politics of erasure extends to the epistemic elision of Black British feminist theorising within the field of social theory. What then are the consequences and interplay of both the lived and epistemic acts of violence? I explore these issues by mapping Black British feminism's anticolonial politics to argue that we should bring this tradition to bear in our analysis of this most recent iteration of racism in our contemporary times.

Keywords: Diane Abbott; Black British feminism; anticolonialism; misogynoir; gendered racism; coloniality

Introduction

This article engages the tradition of anticolonial knowledge production within Black British feminist theorising in order to be attentive to the political economy of gendered and sexualised racism in contemporary Britain. Processes of coloniality and imperialistic domination continue to police Black women and our presence in British social life. Thus, this paper aims to make sense of the gendered and sexualised racism imposed upon the British Member of Parliament Diane Abbott through an examination of a political culture steeped

in the politics of misogynoir. I demonstrate how forms of British, and more explicitly English national identity, have been worked out on the backs of the systematic material and epistemic erasure of Black women from the British body politic with the help of Shirley Anne Tate's (2015) powerful analysis of the iconicity of the Sable-Saffron Venus in the English colonial imaginary . In doing so, I demonstrate the importance of Black feminism in Britain for being attentive to the boundaries and intersections of racism, gender, sexuality, class and nationality in ways that detail their colonial inheritances and their operational uses. At the same time, they provide us with a set of critical tools to redress the global crisis of white supremacy.

I first examine how forms of misogynoir appear within contemporary discourses at a time of British political turmoil. My argument is that an intersectional analysis of the racism faced by Abbott is too often obfuscated from its very specific genealogy of the colonial archive which is always a process that is gendered and sexed through racist ways of knowing. Processes of displacement, othering and the continuing dehumanisation of Black women, whether in plain sight or out of sight, are mediated and regulated through ideological protections of and investments in white normativity and white hegemony underpinned by notions of white racial purity. It is therefore important that we name the explicit terms of this sexist racism as *misogynoir* to understand the boundaries of gendered anti-Blackness at this contemporary conjuncture.

Secondly, I place the misogynoir experienced by Abbott within a longer epistemic tradition of Black anticolonial feminist in Britain. I draw upon Tate's (2015) decolonial analysis of the Sable Saffron Venus and her iconography in the English pre and post-colonial imaginary in order to situate and explicate the gendered and sexist racism of Britain's

colonial longings. Returning to the colonising lens of the Sable-Saffron Venus allows us to see the importance of resituating contemporary forms of racism and their appeal to notions of whiteness that reveal the lingering residual political investments in anti-miscegenation thinking. This Black British feminist approach furthers our understanding of the ways in which constructions of Black womanhood in British public life are entangled in the messy, racialised and classed desires of white English nationalism. Such racial desires and appeals expect the erasure of Black women's voices, bodies and knowledge that continue to haunt the shaping of English notions of whiteness and white racial purity. It is for this reason that configurations of Black womanhood (self-made or colonially imagined) along with our ambivalent (un)settled ties to the British nation can be understood through the lens of the colonial relation that remains contingent upon our present arrangement. As Tate argues,

The history of *the* Black woman's body in the European-North American imagination is imbricated within the racialisation of colonialism and enslavement that still remains today, both in metropolises and former present colonies (2015, p.1).

Finally, the article will conclude by arguing that Black feminism in Britain and its anticolonial imperatives remains vigilant to the politics of erasure. As a political project, Black British feminism is fully aware of its absence in the academy and so is continuously warding against the indifferences shown to its multifarious epistemologies (Anim-Addo 2014). Epistemic indifference chimes acutely with the broader economy of political indifference to the embodied, material realities of having to live under the ongoing coloniality of gendered and sexualised forms of racism. Consequently, Black women in the UK are confronted with the risks of a double erasure of both our lived material realities *and* the epistemic frames we produce that explicate and delineate our being in the world. Black

British feminisms political and epistemic concerns are essential to making sense of the material and epistemic roots of gendered racisms that are currently exacerbated by the global re-intensification of a white supremacist, neo-fascist, far-right political order.

Diane Abbott and gendered anti-Black racism in British politics

In the aftermath of the June 2016 British referendum to leave the European Union, Brexit and its zest for colonial nostalgia, has further opened up an already pre-existing, but now accelerating form of English nationalism coupled with buoyant and blatant expressions of unfettered racisms (Virdee & McGeever, 2018). However, it would be remiss to understand the racist political dimensions of colonial nostalgia without also examining how this racism is inherently and explicitly gendered and sexualised in multiple ways. To further illustrate this point, I want to draw attention to the anti-Black gendered racism waged against Diane Abbott, Member of Parliament for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, who had been subjected to sustained and specific forms of gendered racism which intensified following the UK's decision to leave the European Union.

Diane Abbott, the first Black woman to be elected in Britain as a Member of Parliament in 1987, had firmly held on to her seat during the 2017 snap election where she increased her overall majority by winning more than 35000 votes in her constituency. However, during this election cycle she was also subjected to an extended period of online racist threats and unrelenting public ridicule by the right wing *and* liberal mainstream media. Abbott had appeared in a series of successive TV and press appearances dubbed as 'car-crash' interviews because she was unable to recall accurate figures on how much it would cost the Labour party to fund an extra 10,000 police officers. Her declaration of ill health was not enough to halt the ongoing merciless public hounding from the ruling

Conservative party. One Tory councillor was suspended for sharing an image of Abbott, who he thought should be kept in a zoo, as an ape wearing lipstick (Finch-Lees, 2017). Abbott had received more online abuse than any other MP during the 2017 election despite her popularity as a local constituency MP for over thirty years (Dhrodia 2017).

A number of Labour MPs from inside her own party had questioned her suitability and credibility as Shadow Home Secretary when it was reported in the press that Abbott had missed the Article 50 vote due to ill health. John Mann, accused Abbott of 'cowardice' and 'bottling it' for missing the vote saying that, 'We have some very, very ill people who turned up to parliament to vote yesterday who are so sick they cannot carry on with their work as MPs. They voted and [Ms Abbott] gave herself a sick note at 5pm' (Benjamin, 2017). Her colleague, Caroline Flint dismissed her ill health as 'Brexit Flu' saying, 'We used to have man flu, now we have Brexit flu-that Diane has created here' (Steerpike, 2017). Indeed, Abbott was not sick enough to warrant collegial empathy.

Abbott had reportedly faced verbal abuse earlier in 2015 during an exchange that had taken place between her and Labour MP for Birmingham Yardley, Jess Phillips. Phillips had questioned the Labour Party leadership over its lack of women in senior positions and reported to the press that, 'I roundly told her [Abbott] to fuck off' and that; 'People said to me they had always wanted to say that to her, and I don't know why they don't as the opportunity presents itself every other minute' (Dathan, 2015). Abbott had discussed the incident a few years after recalling that no one had asked her about it at the time:

Jess Phillips MP never told me to fuck off. What was extraordinary is that she made a big deal about telling people she had. Nobody ever checked back with me. If they had I'd have said no, she didn't (Segalov, 2018).

Phillips' advocacy of verbal abuse against Abbott existed within a violent torrent of unrelenting racist and sexualised hatred that circulated in the digital world. The online abuse of Abbott on social media platforms such as Twitter had the effect of forcing her to stop using the service (Segalov, 2018). Amnesty International published a report which showed that during the run up to the general election in 2017, Abbott received almost half (45.14%) of all abusive tweets against women MPs including those from the Conservative and Scottish National parties combined (Dhrodia, 2017). In her own words Abbott recalls the targeted gendered, sexualised racism of her abuse:

I've had death threats, I've had people tweeting that I should be hung if "they could find a tree big enough to take the fat bitch's weight" ... I've had rape threats ... and n*gger, *over and over and over again* (Dhrodia, 2017 [my emphasis]).

Misogynoir

Phillips' self-righteous satisfaction, if not pleasure, in boasting about her claim to have verbally attacked Abbott was performed under the auspices of advocating for women's equality and inclusion. However, I want to argue that Phillips was doing the work of demanding particular roles for white women in ways that dovetail with Vron Ware's (1992) analysis of white womanhood as a gendered and racialised social category often aligned with dominant ideologies and logics of empire. Here, being a white woman is about being *thought of as a woman* (Ware, 1992).

Phillips' telling turn of phrase when she described verbally abusing Abbott as a seemingly ceaseless 'opportunity,' deserves further critical attention. Phillips' prerogative was to adopt a 'heroic' performative style of posturing. She had elected herself to represent the feelings of those who she said wanted to tell Diane to 'fuck off' but did not possess the hubris to have done so. Occupying a position of entitlement allowed her a degree of self-

proclaimed notoriety. Yet still, her sense of white liberal feminist power also existed upon the implicit expulsion of Abbott from a category of protected and defensible womanhood. Phillips positioned Abbott, a Black woman, as 'fair game', a legitimate target for repeated verbal violence within a seemingly inexhaustible stream of 'opportunities', unencumbered by the passing of time. This example of white liberal feminist aggression towards Abbott from within her own political party reveals the fragility of white feminist allegiances within the context of a political landscape that routinely produces anti-Black gendered racisms. Abbott becomes situated as a 'space invader' (Puwar, 2004) who sits outside of the gendered and raced category of 'womanhood' that Phillips infers; a category that is far from neutral but systematically structured on notions of white feminised normativity.

Independent Black feminist commentators and academics who were critical of the intersecting abuses Abbott had experienced, explicitly named this discursive violence as *misogynoir* (Akpan, 2017; Campion 2019; Goodfellow, 2017). *Misogynoir* is a term devised by the African American queer feminist, Moya Bailey and expanded upon by the independent creative and social critic Trudy to specifically describe how racism and anti-Blackness alter the experience of misogyny for Black women (Bailey & Trudy 2018). This distinctive brand of hatred directed at Black women produces a binary of 'good' White womanhood at the top and 'bad' non-womanhood for Black women at the bottom of this hierarchical structure of domination. It further exposes the ways that ending racism without ending sexism and capitalism will not help Black women because, as Trudy argues, 'so much of what Black women experience at all levels of society reflects the contempt that people have for womanhood, Blackness and Black womanhood in particular' (Bailey & Trudy 2018, p.767). *Misogynoir* creates invisibility for Black women's pain and hypervisibility for what

are deemed as inherent flaws in Black womanhood by speaking to the specific violence that Black women experience due to anti-Blackness (Bailey & Trudy 2018).

The concept of misogynoir is important in terms of helping us to unravel the (un)gendering of a form of anti-Blackness that is specific to Black womanhood. Misogynoir sits within a range of broader theoretical traditions within Black feminism that take apart colonial racialisation and (un)gendering to make visible Black women's subjectivities. Part of this work requires that we understand how racism conceptualises the Black woman, within systems of colonial world-making, as a figure that produces meaning through discursive logics of domination. For example, Heidi Mirza (1997) observes that when Black women are traced in dominant histories, how she is permitted to appear is glimpsed somewhere between the patriarchal, the colonial and the postcolonial; she appears and disappears as she is needed as the dutiful wife and daughter, the hard (but unhappy and grateful!) worker, the sexually available exotic other, the controlling asexual mother, or simply homogenized as the 'third world' woman' (Mirza 1997, p.6).

Hortense Spillers (1987) makes a similar argument to Mirza (1997). In her widely cited powerful essay, 'Mamas baby, Papas maybe' she declares 'I am a marked woman' (1987, p.65). Here, the 'mark' and the 'woman' are the locus of what Spillers refers to as 'confounded identities' that serve the needs of her country rather than of her own. The Black woman becomes a split subject, a human being marked by a mythical assortment of telegraphic coding. This discursive field of marks and racialised coding, bury the agent Black woman making it difficult for her 'to come clean' (Spillers, p.65). This split between the mark, the mythical, the episteme, the representational and multifarious Black womanhood, points to the ongoing urgent theme within Black feminism to unfold the conundrum of our

absence/presence; our visibility and invisibility; the ways we are cited into and uncited out of existence. To be more direct, how does the Black woman show up in spaces as Gail Lewis (2017) asks, as a figure and as an 'embodied/sentient subject'. Lewis explores what is being foreclosed in the legacies of 'colonial worlding,' where the appalling state violence enacted upon women such as Sarah Reed¹, 'can be linked to a long trail of colonial practice in which 'black' and 'woman' were mutually exclusive terms under conditions of Atlantic enslavement' (Lewis 2017, p.4).

Spillers helps us to understand Abbott's use of the phrase, 'over and over again' as she described the regularity and routine pattern of her experience of misogynoir. Abbott - in ways that are familiar to Gina Miller, Munroe Bergdorf, Sarah Reed, Naomi Hersi, Cynthia Jarrett, Joy Gardner and the countless unnamed women racialised as Black - becomes that marked woman. The marking and the branding carry with them the weight of historic conditions that not only make the Black woman the target of sexualised forms of violence, she is also subjected to acts of torture and prostration 'that we imagine as the peculiar province of *male* brutality and torture inflicted by other males' (Spillers 1997, p.68). Spillers provides us with the conceptual frame to think about the locus of the Black woman as an 'ungendered' text under systems of domination and captivity where,

The ruling episteme ... remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is "murdered" over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise (Spillers 1997, p.68).

¹ Sarah Reed was a 32 year old Black woman who was found dead in her cell at Holloway Prison in January 2016. She had previously been the victim of a police brutality in 2012 and an alleged sexual assault.

Spillers further states, 'I would call it the Great Long National Shame' (Spillers 1997, p.68). And yet, while this shame that Spillers speaks to is framed as a 'national' concern here, we also know that the violence of Atlantic enslavement operated across competing national borders as a globalising imperial project. The temporality of an unfettered, extended and expansive period of contested European imperial violence; its colonising and enterprising reach across different territories, geographies and spaces; it's deep, residual, explicit and exceptional forms of white supremacist hegemonies, racist logics and epistemes; operated as a transnational phenomenon with specific and particular histories that had taken localised forms. Here, the knowledge fields of imperial domination are marked upon Black women in ways that both sexualised and (un)gendered their being within a repertoire of violence that further renders the location of their bodies as the site of biological possession; as industrious and (re)productive to the machinery of European imperial world making that both reinforced as well as traversed national configurations. Misogynoir, then can be thought of as a form of imperial (un)gendering or as a nationally contained configuration of gendered antiblackness where it functions, as Christina Sharpe (2016) argues, as a total climate to impose non/being onto Black people's lives that are lived with no state or nation to protect us.

It is here that we should also recognise that misogynoir is not monolithic. Nuanced, differentiated and specific localised forms of gendered anti-blackness exist that are tied to the way racism, and resistances to it, unfolds in particular locations. The following section seeks to situate and historicise the misogynoir experienced by Abbott within the specific anticolonial imperatives of Black British feminist critiques that theorise Black women's bodies in relation to the British imperial nation. By doing so, Black feminist epistemologies that take on the gendered coloniality of British national politics, provide prescient analytical

and methodological tools to help us to think through and make sense of the gendered and sexualised borders of racism specifically in relation to the English imperial project.

The Sable-Saffron Venus, English nationality and the erasure of Black women in Britain

The colonial character of misogynoir along with a desire for its repeated re-enactment in contemporary times may feel too frequent or seem too familiar to Black women who dare to speak against it or not. There is a historical rhythm, a repetition and regularity to the horrifying accounts of gendered and sexualised racism that Abbott bears witness to at a time where Britain is grappling to redefine its declining relevance and its diminished imperial bearing in the world. These persistent and routine racialised violations against Black subjectivities captured by Abbott's phrase, 'over and over and over again' can tell us something about the ways in which the spectre of Black suffering is not only an exercise of power; it is also essential to the ongoing processes by which the nation is making sense of itself.

In this economy of Black suffering, Saidiya Hartman (1997) discusses the role of enjoyment during chattel slavery in North America to argue that 'Blackness provided the occasion for self-reflection as well as for an exploration of terror, desire, fear, loathing and longing,' in ways that it allowed both the master and the nation to understand and make sense of themselves (Hartman 1997, p.7). Sexualised racism then becomes part of a lexicon of punishment where violence against bodies that are made other become a function of stabilising the normality of white patriarchal modes of power. Indeed, it is one way in which white supremacy and white hegemonic rule are understood. Keeping this in mind, I want to consider the ways in which Britishness and perhaps more precisely, Englishness, as a

political project in this moment of national calamity is being made through racialised and sexualised questions of power, pleasure and punishment.

The horror and violence described above by Abbott – and the ways that others have imagined and fantasied about inflicting such violence physically, discursively, affectively and politically onto her person – further reveals the terms of a colonial repository of a dominant white patriarchal British political thought. In her book, *Black Women's Bodies and the Nation*, Tate (2015) argues that the colonising gaze on the Black woman's body has a long history that is repeated through varying tropes, specifically the iconicity of the Sable-Saffron Venus. Tate's use of the Sable Saffron Venus reveals how her iconicity has been a staple representation of Black womanhood in its relation to the British national imaginary along with the satirical pleasures associated with her ridicule. Tate is interested in exploring the Sable Saffron Venus as depicted in European poetry and paintings 'as a conscious act of colonial and contemporary white racial hygiene to deal with white male desire and disgust for the Black woman's body, as well as fear of loss of sovereignty through heterosexual transracial intimacy and concubinage' (Tate 2015, p.17).

The Sable-Saffron Venus trope can show us how the Black woman's body has long been pathologically and sexually constructed as an abnormal racialised other within English literature and art (Allen, 2011; Tate, 2015). Sable-Saffron's iconography existed long before the emergence of Sara Baartman, the Khoikhoi woman displayed in a human zoo in Piccadilly Circus in 1810 (Allen, 2011) and her violent reconstruction as the 'Hottentot Venus' in the white patriarchal colonial imaginary. The Sable-Saffron Venus, 'predates Baartman and as such was [the] context for her emergence and that of other images of the Black woman in the Caribbean and Europe' (Tate 2015, p.2). The Sable-Saffron Venus'

particular genealogy can be traced to early European travel writers who had burdened Black women's bodies with demarcating the gendered and raced boundaries of European national identities (Tate, 2015). White European male attraction to Black women meant that the Sable Saffron Venus was cast in the realm of base desires rather than through notions of idealised beauty (Allen, 2011). Black women's bodies had taken on a fundamentally contradictory discursive iconicity that operated within a range of affective registers from 'desirable and repulsive, available and untouchable, productive and reproductive, beautiful and Black' (Tate 2015, p.1).

The iconic discursive field of the Sable-Saffron Venus also produced 'monstrous bodies' (Tate, 2015) used to mark the racialised other within European colonial imaginaries. Echoes of how Black women are transformed into monstrous others through the colonising lens became evident in Abbotts recollection of calls for her to be lynched and/or raped. Her sexuality and its uses were deployed through the possessive entrapment of the colonial lens. As a Black woman, Abbott was deserving of perpetual sexualised, racialised punishment and domination. She need not talk her truth because her only function was to service the sexually violent imaginaries of her abusers and to be productive in reproducing the memory of an unfettered sexualised archive. Emptying out the voices and separating the speech, and associated thoughts of Black women from the materiality of their own existence, is integral to the process of how Black women become dehumanised through colonial sexual subjection. It is also an integral function of being categorised as non-human where Black women's bodies are mapped onto routine and historic forms of sexual fecundity.

Various social media memes and mainstream media political commentators continued this pattern of vicious dehumanisation of Abbott echoing the Sable-Saffron Venus trope of Black women's bodies being a contradictory site of sexual desirability and repulsiveness. In 2016, former Channel 4 journalist, Michael Crick had tweeted an excerpt of a conversation he supposedly had with a London taxi driver who was reported to have said, 'You couldn't vote for that Corbyn, could you? Not for anyone that's messed around with that Diane Abbott' (cited in Goodfellow, 2016). The driver's account was tweeted supposedly in 'jest' by Crick, mocking Abbott and making her the butt of his satirical joke. It was widely reported in the British media that during 1970's Abbott was romantically involved with Labour's current party leader, Jeremy Corbyn (Hunt, 2018). The idea of Abbott being in an intimate relationship with Corbyn, a potential candidate to become the next Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, brought to the fore the ways in which the Sable Saffron Venus's 'Black and beautiful' sexuality quickly becomes abject. Abbott is reconfigured on white heteronormative patriarchal terms as 'that' thing that is a potential source of racialised 'contamination' of the highest seat in British political office.

Underneath the taxi driver's contempt and Crick's mocking tweet exists discomfort and repulsion that are exemplars of the way English nationalism has associated (un)gendered Blackness and monstrosity with ideas of white racial hygiene. Here, the racialised and sexualised apprehensions of Corbyn 'messing around' with Abbott, evokes the spectre of historical anti-miscegenation political thought as evident in Victorian Britain (DeVere Brody, 1998). Except now it reappears as sexualised and racialised satire at a time of British political crisis over who will be suitable to lead Britain as it seeks to leave the European Union.

During Victorian Britain, White men in their pursuit to sexually exploit Black women were warned about the supposed 'dangers' of illicit sex with Black women from the colonies. This is despite the reality that their sexual desires were used in the violent subjugation and rape of Black women. DeVere Brody's (1998) readings of Victorian literary, visual and theatrical cultures reveal how Black women became indispensable to the construction of Englishness as a white, masculine and 'pure' subjectivity. The utility of such depictions of Black women showed how they worked to reproduce certain forms of English subjectivity. The dominating ideology allowed Englishmen access to inconsequential and 'easy' sex with Black women while sexual relations between Black men and white women were seen as sterile, impossible or as a form of pain and suffering.

Tate's discussion on the Sable-Saffron Venus extends DeVere Brody's analysis to think through the ideological repulsions of colonial race hygiene and the politics of heterosexual transracial intimacies. The English man's lust for the dark-skinned Saffron temptress is examined by Tate using an etching of the satirical print, *'Johnny Newcome in love in the West Indies.'* Published in 1808, this fictitious tale depicts Newcome's recent arrival in the colonies to join the creole class to engage in concubinage with Black enslaved women. Johnny is effectively lampooned for being 'smitten' by Mimbo Wampo, a plump dark-skinned woman depicted as a 'mammy' like figure whose exploited sexual labour goes on to produce nine 'mulatto' 'pickaninnies' (Tate, 2015). These nine children were meant to illustrate the economic benefit and the fecundity of the Black woman-white man 'reproductive pairing as in popular European lore' (Tate 2015, p.31). The tale was also a warning about what could happen to white Englishmen who decided to stray away from English notions of respectable citizenship which were hinged upon ideas of white racial

purity and defined by, 'maintaining the connection between heterosexuality, class, gender and 'race'' (Tate 2015, p.32). Thus, the Johnny Newcome satire,

expressed national metropolitan anxieties about class, 'race', gender, sexuality and citizenship. These formed the matrix within which negative white affects evolved focused on the destabilizing body of the Sable-Saffron Venus (Tate 2015, p.33).

It is possible to draw some loose parallels between the contradictory desires of English Victorian morality and the lampooning of Johnny Newcome's sexual exploits of Black women in the colonies with the ways in which contemporary media commentators on Jeremy Corbyn have satirized and ridiculed his seemingly unforgivable romantic relationship with Abbott within the contemporary metropole. Under the spurious anti-miscegenation lens of the colonial past, Corbyn's legitimacy as a future prime minister becomes a source of English mockery on remarkably similar terms as Newcome; namely by the way they are both depicted as foolhardy metropolitan white male citizens that have been duped by their sexual practice and desire for Black women. Although it is the Black woman who is ultimately the butt of this joke, the intended embarrassment of such mockery in this case is aimed at Corbyn and his failure as a possible future leader to publicly secure the racialised boundaries of white English national identity and its contingent fantasy of protecting, upholding and valuing the myth of white racial purity. Corbyn's romantic partnering with Abbott is deemed as literally 'messing' with the formation and idealisation of English modes of white supremacy and white racial rule. The symbolism of their relationship can be read as casting Corbyn as the weakest link in any attempt to defend the nation against the always looming incursion of the sexualised racial other. It can therefore be argued that the lens of colonial hygiene and its anti-miscegenation gaze continues to find its uses within our present discourses on Black women's bodies and their proximity to spaces of political

power. Thus, the destabilising effects of the Sable Saffron Venus remains a traceable trope in our contemporary times (Tate, 2015).

Abbott's representation as a destabilising force was further compounded with ableist depictions of her supposedly diminishing mental capacities. The 'strong Black woman' trope became inverted and supplemented for the idea that Abbott was both weak and cognitively incompetent as a Shadow Home Secretary in waiting due to her mathematical mistake over the costings for Labour's policy to increase police numbers. Again, it was open season for Abbott and her health to be widely mocked across the narrow political spectrum of the British mainstream media on the grounds that she did not possess the intellectual capacities to calculate 'basic numbers.' The Guardian's parliamentary sketch writer, John Crace described Abbott as 'comedy gold' giving her the nickname 'Dozy Dianne' (Crace 2017a; Crace 2017b). In the UK, parliamentary sketch writing has a long tradition that can be traced back to some of the early journalistic writings of Charles Dickens and is lauded for its wit and satire (Drew, 2003). Sketch writers have been described as 'equal opportunity critics, not so much holding politicians to account as holding them up to ridicule' (Greenslade, 2017).

However, such appeals to an imagined liberal fairness in the satirical machinery of British political commentariat works to deny and underplay the tools of sexualized and racialised violence drawn from the colonial archive that attempted to put Abbott back into an assumed submissive place. According to Crace's fellow Guardian journalist, Gaby Hinsliff, the gendered racism that Abbott had received in the press resembled 'playground bullying' that 'made you feel queasy' with a 'strong desire to look away' (Hinsliff, 2017). Bullying, as a single-issue point of analysis obscures the historical, structural and material histories of

colonialism and enslavement, the terms by which intersecting sexist and racist violence are enacted. For Hinsliff, the obvious common-sense answer to the question as to whether White male politicians had been treated in the same way as Abbott, was that it had certainly happened in the past. She cites the treatment of Ian Duncan Smith in his last days as a Tory leader where 'both the media and his own party treated him with gratuitous public cruelty;' and 'the mortified Gordon Brown' being asked 'if he was secretly on medication.' Bullying then becomes a term that is deployed to flatten out and collapse all behaviours deemed abusive into a meritocratic and diverse schema of mistreatment where victims exist 'on all sides' (Hinsliff 2017).

In an extraordinary dismissal of racism and sexism, Hinsliff wrote, 'crying racism or misogyny in the face of legitimate scrutiny merely cheapens the issue' (Hinsliff, 2017). Such a dismissal of misogynoir could only arise from the position of profound relational power that presumes to dictate the terms as to when racism and sexism should be seen as 'legitimate' grievances. Here we see the operation of an assumed fairness beholden to the innocence of white womanhood where the enactment of the violent erasure of Black female suffering exists within the context of white hegemonic patriarchal rule that remains normative and routinely unimpeded. Hinsliff's article represents the politics of White liberal feminism and its neoliberal underpinnings that can deny or downplay the racism that Abbott faced by simply 'looking away' so as to not upset *her* feelings. The deniability of racism, as worked through the myth of post-racial arrival, wants us to believe that racism is behind us precisely in the moment that racism is being resurrected and enacted in its deniability. These strategies of racial denial appeal to westernised liberal notions of White innocence (Wekker, 2016), fairness, objectivity, equality, rationality and neutrality that still find their operational power through the normalising of whiteness and White racial

hegemonic rule while concurrently downplaying or flatly denying the ongoing forces of intersecting forms of racialised and gendered violence.

I have framed my analysis of the misogynoir faced by Abbott through Tate's (2015) work on the *Sable Saffron Venus* to consider the relative ease by which the repeated violence of sexualised gendered racism is both ensnared and denied within British colonial discourses. It further reveals how instrumental these ideas are to erasing the lived experiences of gendered racism in the lives of Black women and women of colour from the English national scene. However, in order for us to fully understand the problem of our entanglements through the (post)colonial, racial and gendered political order (Tate, 2015), Black British feminism implores us to make better use of their anticolonial tools of critique and analysis that name the racist and sexist coloniality of Black women's lives. It is here that the risk of a double erasure exists between the intertwined political and the epistemological fields of Black women's living and theorising from within the UK. I now want to turn our attention to situating this analysis by mapping anticolonial theories within Black British feminist epistemologies.

Anticolonial epistemologies within Black British feminist thought

The anticolonial political project of Black British feminism was important in terms of naming the discursive operation of imperial power at the intersections of gender, racism, homophobia, class and sexism in the formation of British social theory and colonial ways of knowing. In the same decade that Abbott was first elected to Parliament, Hazel Carby's (1982) essay, 'White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood,' challenged assumptions and expectations of 'automatic sisterhood' across forms of activism and knowledge production found within White feminist politics (Bhavnani & Coulson 1997).

Carby's essay argued that Black women's critique of *history* involved us coming to terms with absences as much as being outraged by the ways it has made us visible (Carby, 1982). It was Carby's and Pratibha Parmar's chapters in *The Empire Strikes Back* that had positioned Black British feminism as a central analytical framework within critical writings on 'race relations' theory in British sociology (Solomos and Back, 1996). Black feminist theorising in Britain pointed out that the colonising lens of British white imperialism could also be found in white socialist feminism which absented Black women and Black feminist perspectives from their analysis (Amos & Parmar 1997; Carby 1982). Valerie Mason-John (1995) argued that Black lesbian women's sexuality was influenced by the atrocities of colonization and slavery. The existence of racism, sexism and homophobia in British society has meant that documenting the *herstory* of Black lesbian women has been all too brief. Black lesbians were at the forefront of Black feminist activism, as well as organizing themselves separately in response to their exclusion, but too often were made to be invisible (Mason-John, 1995).

In *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (Bryan et al. 2018) the authors tackled what they called 'the triple state of bondage' of race, class and sex by critiquing romantic and mythical ideas about Black women's 'innate capacity' to cope with brutality and suffering more than others. This seminal publication documented Black women's everyday struggles with work, education and health care and the ways in which Black women mobilised and organised themselves politically to preserve a sense of identity and community (Bryan et al. 2018). The authors situate these struggles within longer histories of Black women in Britain who held strong and clear anti-imperialist positions including the African Caribbean Marxist activist/intellectual, Claudia Jones. They cite her article written in 1964 in the Black American journal, *Freedomways*, where she wrote:

The citizens of the 'Mother of Democracy' do not yet recognise that the roots of racialism in Britain were laid in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through British conquests in India, Africa and great parts of Asia, as well as the British Caribbean. All the resources of official propaganda and education, the super-structure of British imperialism, were permeated with projecting the oppressed colonial peoples as lesser breeds, as 'inferior coloured peoples', 'savages' and the like – in short, the white man's burden' (Jones cited in Bryan et al., 2018, p.137).

Jones' analysis provides an important anticolonial epistemic frame that helps to differentiate the historic genealogy of Black British feminism as a site of inter and intra-diasporic resistance that is distinctly different but not dialogically separated from, Black feminism in the racial formation of the US. The racialised formations of Black British feminism emerged through interlocking imperial and colonial histories with the migration and settlement of peoples from African, the Indian subcontinent and Caribbean diasporas to Britain. These regionally and geographically differentiated transnational colonised peoples arrived in Britain to find that the complexities of their cultural, religious, gendered, sexual and classed positionings were bludgeoned by the blunt instruments of colonial epistemes that were reinstituted and administered through the material violence of the racialised state. As Avtar Brah (1996) observes, Black and Indian sub-continent communities were commonly described in academic, popular and political discourses as 'coloured people' (not to be confused with 'people of colour'), not simply as a descriptive term, but as 'the colonial code for a relationship of domination and subordination between the coloniser and the colonised' (Brah 1996, p.96). These social and political arrangements between the colonial populace and their differentiated and blunted relational positionings within the metropole contributed to the political conditions for the emergence of Black British feminism in the

1970s and 1980s. Here, the contested category of ‘political blackness’² can also be thought of as an explicitly ‘gendered’ political project (Swaby 2014) because of the ways in which anticolonial epistemologies underpin the narrative and material histories of Black British feminist theory and practice.

For those who write about Black British feminism from within or in proximity to these histories, there is palpable concern relating to the theoretical and material slippage of this work into the politics of epistemic erasure (Mason-John 1995; Hemmings 2011; Amin-Addo 2014; Swaby 2014; Jonsson 2016). As Denise Noble (2015) argues, within British social and cultural theory,

Analysing and giving visibility to the cultural lives and self-defining perspectives of Asian, African, Caribbean, and other racially minoritized women has largely, though not exclusively (Webster 1998; Chamberlain 2011), been left to women from within those cultural identities (Noble 2015, p.54).

Joan Anim-Addo (2014) has further highlighted the relative invisibility of Black British feminism in both national and global contexts. However, she suggests that the threat of multiple forms of erasure is also a call for revisiting, gathering and rescuing the historical record of Black British feminism in Britain to guard ‘against its academic and institutional omission and blindness to the discourses and thought that Black British feminism has generated’ (Anim-Addo, 2014, p.47). Concurrently, Black British feminism’s anticolonial epistemologies can be historically and textually omitted in ways that produce tokenistic

² See Swaby (2014) and Anim-Addo (2014) for richer examinations of political blackness. These contested debates are important and relevant. However, detailing their complexities here would detract from this article’s core thesis on misogynoir.

progress narratives of inclusion within white western feminist genealogies (Hemmings 2011).

As Lewis makes clear, there are ethical consequences to consider when we use the resources we have to hand in the archive of Black feminism. Making the Black woman present in our, 'collective histories, current realities and future potentialities,' would mean acknowledging the harm that has been done to her both historically and in the here and now (Lewis, 2017). The systematic threat of the double erasure of Black women's material lives and epistemic frames in our contemporary and historical times, calls to mind Carby's statement that, 'in Britain too it is as if we don't exist' (Carby 1982, p.221). Her alarming pronouncement acts as a reminder as to why Black feminism in Britain and its anticolonial imperatives remain central to envisioning, strategizing and implementing emancipatory political projects in the present and future.

It is from a position of relative liminality that I am proposing that this tradition of anticolonial Black feminism in Britain is an essential field of social and cultural theory that is needed to delineate and make sense of the unrelenting violence of sexualised, classed, and gendered racism in Britain. The sexualised gendered racism faced by Abbott focuses our attention on the ongoing colonial racialised, sexualised and gendered inheritances which straddle the multiple ways in which Black women in Britain have historically been faced with resisting erasure. I have demonstrated this in my analysis of Diane Abbott, to show the texture of antiblackness through the concept of *misogynoir* within the British context. Misogynoir can take us through different and genealogies of colonial worlding that may or may not have been present in the conceptual moment of the term. This in turn informs my

rationale for placing misogynoir in conversation with the particularity of Black British feminism's anticolonial imperatives.

With the help of Tate (2015) my discussion of the Sable-Saffron Venus's iconicity has shown that questions of British national identity and the melancholic longing for imperial glory are not new. The melancholic turn and the deathly desire for a revival of colonial arrangements have seen gendered and sexualised forms of racism remain robust and constant in their shaping of structures of white supremacist patriarchal power in contemporary English political discourse. Black feminism in Britain and its anticolonial imperatives allows us lay bare this colonial spectacle of violence and the structure of memory that sexualised and gendered forms of racism are contingent upon.

We can recover how Black women can go missing in the grand narratives of imperial domination by also recovering Black feminist tools of analysis that resist and circumnavigate the ways we are erased and made to (dis)appear through the colonising lens. Indeed, the Black feminist method of retrieval never seems to be over. The need to recover what can be easily lost under the forces of epistemic and material erasure remains an ongoing Black feminist political project. Such problems remain very much alive and are evident considering the relative indifference to Diane Abbott's experience of misogynoir and the political climate of gendered anti-Black racism. Black feminist anticolonial epistemologies thus continue to have many sites of struggle (Mirza 1997) that speak back to empire and refuse to submit to its demand for Black women to be silent.

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